



Obama's Speech at Howard: Becoming King

MARIA POST

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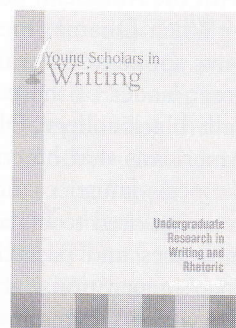
Framing the Reading

Maria Post was a student of Elizabeth Vander Lei's at Calvin College when she wrote this piece in her English 101 course. She was majoring in English and Spanish and minoring in sociology. In her writing course, Post decided to take up the question of "how Barack Obama overcame the barrier of his racial identity to win the acceptance of the African American community" and what that suggests about how he was able to be a successful presidential candidate (para. 3).

Post focuses her inquiry on Obama's September 28, 2008, speech at Howard University, a historically black college, in which the candidate used religious themes and civil rights history to address the problem of achieving social justice. Post's rhetorical analysis examines ways Obama tried to associate himself, through themes, language, and rhetorical style, with Martin Luther King Jr., and in so doing build identification with African American voters.

Because rhetorical theory is so rich and has so many aspects and elements, the sort of textual analysis we often refer to as *rhetorical analysis* can actually take a wide variety of shapes. Rhetorical analysis might focus on any of the five canons of rhetoric, on some persuasive element such as the *pisteis* (logos, ethos, and pathos), on analysis of context and situation (including *kairos*), or any other aspect of rhetorical theory that interests the writer. In this case, Post chooses to conduct her rhetorical analysis from the perspectives of *style* and *identification*. You can easily follow both her headings and conclusion for a compact list of the specific elements she looks at.

On Father's Day, 2008, Barack Obama asked the congregation of the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago to recall one of the early struggles of his campaign. "You remember at the beginning," he asked, "people were wondering, how come he doesn't have all the support in the African-American community? You remember that? That was when I wasn't black enough—now I'm too black." It is true that early in his campaign, Obama struggled to rally blacks to his side.



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In fact, throughout 2007, more blacks said they preferred Hillary Clinton than said they preferred Obama for the Democratic nomination (Saad).

Some critics even questioned whether Obama, as a biracial man, was “black enough” to authentically represent African American interests. Ron Walters, an expert on African American leadership and politics, writes that since Obama’s mother was a white American and his father was Kenyan, and since he was raised in Hawaii and Indonesia, “his identity omitted many of the cultural markers with which Blacks are more familiar to the extent that it has promoted a curiosity of ‘cultural fit’ that in turn has become an issue of political trust” (13). Walters also quotes Debra Dickerson, a black writer with the online magazine *Salon*, as suggesting that since Obama’s father was a voluntary immigrant from Kenya, Obama is not black in the traditional sense. She said in 2006 that “‘Black’, in our political and social reality, means those descendants from West African slaves. Voluntary immigrants of African descent . . . are just that, voluntary immigrants of African descent with markedly different outlooks on the role of race in their lives and politics” (9). Also, since Obama’s candidacy arose from the center of the electorate rather than from within the black community (16), Obama has had to prove to African Americans that he can represent their interests.

The story of how Barack Obama overcame the barrier of his racial identity to win the acceptance of the African American community does much to answer the question of why Obama has been a successful candidate. Throughout the presidential race, he has used flamboyant rhetoric to present himself as a representative of the people. Obama persuades voters to project themselves onto him and to see themselves in him, thus establishing an ethos as a candidate who speaks for all. By looking at his speech on 28 September 2007, at Howard University, we can see how Obama established himself as a member and a leader of the black community, and thus understand better how Obama has connected with the American people throughout the race.

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When Obama, then a contender for the Democratic presidential nomination, spoke at Howard University, he aimed to establish himself as the next great leader of the African American community. Since Howard is a historically black college, Obama’s speech offered an opportunity to convince African Americans that he could represent them and their interests as president. His themes—injustice and the fight for civil rights, both past and present—also seem tailored to his audience. Obama compares past injustices to present-day injustices and past civil rights workers to the activists of his and his audience’s generations. The main idea of his speech is that no matter the risk, “we” (by which Obama means either the American people in general or the African

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American community of which he claims he is a part) must fight for justice. Obama elevates his audience members by telling them that by working to correct today's societal injustices, they can be the successors to civil rights activists of the past. Through his implication that his past work to fight injustice qualifies him to represent and lead his audience, he also elevates himself to the level of a civil rights leader. He elevates himself and his audience further by using sacred and heroic association and the traditional Moses typology to compare his audience to the biblical Israelites, past civil rights activists to Moses, and both himself and the audience to Moses's successor, Joshua. Since Obama is aiming in his speech to gain credibility as a black leader, it is interesting to note that Martin Luther King Jr. frequently used elevation, sacred and heroic association, and the Moses typology. Also, by claiming to be Joshua, Obama suggests that he is a successor to past civil rights leaders such as King. Thus, when Obama imitates King by using repetition, sacred and heroic association, elevation, and the Moses typology, Obama reminds his audience of King's rhetoric and connects himself with past leaders of the African American community. By using language reminiscent of King to speak to African Americans about civil rights, Obama attempts to prove not only his "blackness" but also his ability to represent the black community as King had done before him.

In the Style of Martin Luther King

Obama, in his speech at Howard, consistently uses the stylistic techniques of Martin Luther King to establish himself as King's successor. Obama uses King's stylistic strategies to captivate the people in his audience so they will accept him as a leader in the fight for civil rights. According to Richard Lischer, a professor at Duke University's Divinity School, King promoted civil rights by appealing to his audience's sense of beauty: he "pursued his high and serious purpose with a style whose first principle was the achievement of pleasure." King used repetition and rhyme to create pleasure in his audience (120). Obama uses language reminiscent of King for the same purpose of captivation. He repeats sounds and words to delight his audience, emphasize important ideas, and establish an ethos as King's successor.

Repetition

In the first major section of repetition in his speech at Howard, Obama strengthens his comparison of himself to King by repeating ideas that tie past civil rights activists and their leaders to himself and his audience. He compares the injustice of the civil rights era to present-day inequality, explaining that if King and other activists of the past could fight injustice, modern Americans can as well. This section of the speech focuses on the idea that "those who came before us did not strike a blow against injustice only so that we would allow injustice to fester in our time." Repeating this idea, Obama invokes King's name to talk about Hurricane Katrina, saying, "Dr. King did not take us to the mountaintop so that we would allow a terrible storm to ravage those

who were stranded in the valley.” Obama expounds on the theme of past and present injustice by comparing the success of *Brown v. Board of Education* to the failure of today’s school system, and by comparing the Little Rock Nine with the Jena Six. Obama also appeals to his audience by comparing everyday people struggling against civil rights era injustice to those struggling against current injustice:

The teenagers and college students who left their homes to march in the streets of Birmingham and Montgomery; the mothers who walked instead of taking the bus after a long day of doing somebody else’s laundry and cleaning somebody else’s kitchen—they didn’t brave fire hoses and Billy clubs so that their grandchildren and their great-grandchildren would still wonder at the beginning of the 21st century whether their vote would be counted; whether their civil rights would be protected by their government; whether justice would be equal and opportunity would be theirs.

Obama’s frequent use of the “They didn’t . . . so we would” pattern effectively employs King’s technique of repetition to appeal to Obama’s audience and heighten his comparison of himself with King. By repeatedly citing both examples of civil rights victories and persisting inequalities, Obama appeals both to his audience’s pride in their forebears, including King, and to their sense that they can be successors to their heroes, joining with Obama to fight injustice. Thus, Obama lays the groundwork for his later use of elevation and sacred and heroic association as well as the implication that he can lead African Americans as both a Joshua figure and a successor to King. Obama continues to use language reminiscent of King in the rest of the speech. He repeats sounds, using stylistic techniques that King used, to establish that he knows how to lead the black community. One of King’s repetition strategies that Obama uses is *anaphora*. Anaphora is the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginning of successive clauses. King used anaphora in his speech “Our God Is Marching On!”, saying:

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever.

How long? Not long, because you still reap what you sow.

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

How long? Not long, ’cause mine eyes have seen the glory . . . (qtd. in Lischer 128)

Obama echoes King’s use of anaphora after describing his risk-taking as an Illinois state senator reforming the death penalty system. He says, “I believed that it was too risky not to act,” and then repeats the phrase “What’s risky”: “What’s too risky is keeping quiet. What’s too risky is looking the other way.” When Obama uses language reminiscent of King’s rhetoric in this passage, he also strengthens his comparison of himself and his audience to past civil rights activists, boldly confronting institutional injustice.

Obama continues to echo King’s rhetoric and strengthen his claim to be King’s successor by using both anaphora and *epistrophe*. He uses anaphora again after promoting the idea of drug rehabilitation programs: “Let’s reform

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this system. Let's do what's smart. Let's do what's just." He also repeats the phrase "It will take a movement" to inspire the audience to action, saying, "It will take a movement to finish what began in Topeka, Kansas and Little Rock, Arkansas. It will take a movement of Americans from every city and town." After explaining the injustice of sentencing of drug offenders, he uses epistrophe, ending a series of sentences with the same words. He says, "Judges think that's wrong. Republicans think that's wrong. Democrats think that's wrong." He also repeats the word "possible" in another example of epistrophe to convince his audience that change can come about: "I would not have driven out to Chicago after college to organize jobless neighborhoods if I didn't believe this was possible. . . . I would not be standing here today if I didn't believe this was possible. . . . And I know that you believe it's possible too." This repetition, in addition to engaging and inspiring his audience, also connects Obama, once more, with King.

At the end of his speech, Obama uses anaphora again both to encourage his audience and to establish himself, through the use of King's stylistic strategies, as King's successor. The same passage contains rhyme meant to delight Obama's listeners, inspire them, and remind them of King's rhetoric. The type of rhyme that Obama uses in the passage is *homoioteleuton*, the similarity of endings of adjacent or parallel words. The passage reads: "Be strong and have courage in the face of joblessness and helplessness and hopelessness. Be strong and have courage, in the face of our doubts and fears, in the face of skepticism, in the face of cynicism, in the face of a mighty river." The words "Be strong and have courage" are taken from the biblical book of Joshua. This quotation is indicative of Obama's use of sacred and heroic association and also strengthens his ultimate comparison of himself to Joshua, and consequently to Moses and King. Thus, in this passage Obama connects himself with King not only by using similar language to King but also by using the Moses typology to imply that he is King's successor.

Elevation

Another of King's methods that Obama uses to connect himself and his audience with the historic fight against injustice, and thus with King and fellow civil rights workers, is elevation. According to Lischer, King sought "to *elevate* the cause he represented to one of noble and historic proportions" (121). For example, speaking of the struggle for civil rights in the United States, King said, "We must see the tension in this nation is between *injustice* and *justice*, between the forces of *light* and the forces of *darkness*" (122). Obama uses this strategy of elevation to remind the members of his audience that the fight for justice is significant, historic, and heroic. He also elevates both them and himself to convince them that they are capable of fighting for justice and that he can lead them in that fight. He says, "I'm not just running to make history. I'm running because I believe that together, we can change history's course." Obama also speaks of the potential of the United States to fight injustice: "No one leader . . . can . . . make real the promise of opportunity and equality for every citizen. Only a country can do these things. Only this country can do these things."

With this last sentence, Obama has effectively elevated the United States to be the only country in the entire world with a chance to create a just society. He invites his audience to join him in the historic fight for justice. By elevating the struggle for civil rights to epic proportions, and by doing so in the context of a campaign speech, Obama is also elevating the cause of his candidacy.

Sacred and Heroic Association

A method Obama uses to elevate both his audience and himself is sacred and heroic association. In this rhetorical strategy, speakers use allusions to both religious texts and significant events and people to elevate both the audience and their cause (Lischer 129–30). King used this strategy to allow his audience to identify with heroes of the past. For example, in his final sermon, after speaking of justice and brotherhood, King quoted from the biblical book of Job: “And that day the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy” (qtd. in Lischer 130). This sacred association gave a sense of holiness to King’s cause. Obama imitates this strategy of elevation. First, he elevates his audience to the level of history-makers and heroes. He says, “I believe it’s time for this generation to make its own mark—to write our own chapter in the American story.” Obama elevates both his audience and himself by convincing the members of his audience that together, he and they can change the course of history, as their predecessors in the civil rights movement did. By claiming that the members of his audience can be as heroic as civil rights demonstrators of the past, and by also claiming that he can lead them in the fight for civil rights, Obama is elevating himself by suggesting that he can be a heroic civil rights leader in the mold of King. Obama uses sacred and heroic association again just before the conclusion of the speech. He compares his audience to the biblical hero Joshua, saying, “You are members of the Joshua generation.” In this reference, Obama is also using the Moses/Joshua typology, another strategy employed by King.

Moses/Joshua Typology

According to prominent Martin Luther King Jr. scholar Keith Miller, since the time of slavery, African American speakers have used the Moses typology in their rhetoric. African American rhetoric has traditionally employed the concept of “sacred time,” unrestricted by limits of geography or chronology, which allows them to see biblical characters as recurring archetypes. This means that characters from the Old Testament could appear in the New Testament and also in the present day (“Alabama as Egypt” 20). In his book *Voice of Deliverance*, Miller explains that slaves often identified themselves with the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, and they also often combined Moses and Jesus into a common deliverer (20). In Christian typology, Moses and Jesus can also be related to Joshua. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that “Jesus is but the Greek from of Joshua who led the Israelites across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. . . . Matthew sees Jesus as a second but greater Moses” (qtd. in Miller, “Alabama as Egypt” 20).

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Miller demonstrates that King used the Moses typology to identify himself with Moses and African Americans with the Hebrews. In King's speech "Death of Evil on the Seashore," he compares the fight for civil rights to the struggle of Israelite slaves. For example, he says that after the Civil War, the "pharaohs of the South" made an "Egypt of segregation." Now, he says, blacks can escape from Egypt and by striving "shall reach the Promised Land" (qtd. in Miller, "Alabama as Egypt" 27-28). In his speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop," King again uses the Moses typology. He portrays himself as Moses, who climbed a mountain to look out over the Promised Land that he would never reach. King says, "I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land" (qtd. in Miller, *Voice of Deliverance* 182). King clearly plays the part of Moses in this speech. But just as Moses died before he could lead his people into the Promised Land, King died one day after his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, with the fight for civil rights still raging. Who, then, is left to finish his work, to play Joshua to King's Moses?

In his speech at Howard, Obama both poses this question and answers it. He expands the Moses/Joshua typology to include civil rights demonstrators and leaders of the past and present. He honors past civil rights workers who played the role of Moses, saying, "Everyone in this room stands on the shoulders of many Moses. They are the courageous men and women who marched and fought and bled for the rights and freedoms we enjoy today." He also shows the need for a Joshua, a new leader to carry on the struggle. He continues where King left off in "I've Been to the Mountaintop," saying, "It was not in God's plan to have Moses cross the river. Instead He would call on Joshua to finish the work that Moses began. He would ask Joshua to take his people that final distance." Obama at first appears to appoint his audience as Joshua. He calls them "members of the Joshua Generation," and he says to them, "It is up to you to cross the river." However, when he actually gave his speech, Obama added a few sentences to his prepared remarks that make clear who the real Joshua is. He says, "When Joshua discovered the challenge he faced, he had doubts and he had worries. He told God: 'Don't choose me; I'm not strong enough; I'm not wise enough; I don't have the training; I don't have enough experience.'" Here Obama refers to the fact that he himself has been criticized for not having enough political experience, a joke that the audience obviously appreciated, given their laughter. However, by saying that Joshua didn't have "enough experience," Obama is doing more than joking: he is drawing a parallel between himself and Joshua. Joshua did not have experience, but God still ordained him to lead his people to the Promised Land. It has been said that Obama does not have experience; however, he can still be the leader of the Joshua Generation. He can, in fact, be Joshua. He can continue the work of his people's Moses, Dr. King. As president, he can be King's successor and lead his people to the Promised Land.

By comparing himself to Joshua, Obama is implying that he is not merely a politician but a hero, ordained by God to lead his people. The question of how

Obama is able to claim to be a successor to King and a Joshua figure without being labeled presumptuous has two possible answers. One could be that, although Obama uses King's rhetorical strategies, overall his comparison of himself to King is fairly subtle. For instance, he only actually mentions King a few times in his speech. However, using the Moses/Joshua typology ensures that once his listeners have identified past civil rights leaders with Moses and Obama with Joshua, they will take the next logical step and identify Obama with King. However, Obama's claim is still quite bold, and the question of how he was able to make it while avoiding the charge of presumption is still a vexing one.

I believe that the answer to this question ultimately lies in Obama's use of elevation. Obama connects with voters, convincing them to project themselves and their dreams onto him. Thus, Obama becomes in effect more than a representative of them; to the audience members, they and Obama become almost one and the same. Thus, when Obama elevates his audience, he also elevates himself. When Obama compares his listeners to those who marched in civil rights era demonstrations, he, as their representative, also implicitly compares himself to the leaders of those marches. When Obama, then, calls his audience the "Joshua Generation," he, as a representative of his audience, is logically also a member of the Joshua Generation. If Obama's listeners accept the claim that they are analogous to the Israelites, God's chosen people, and if they accept Obama as their leader, then it would logically follow that they see Obama as Joshua, a leader of the Israelites. Since Martin Luther King Jr. is Moses, and since Obama is Joshua, Moses's successor, Obama is clearly King's successor. Obama will continue where King left off; Obama will lead African Americans in the continued struggle for civil rights; Obama will lead his people into the Promised Land.

Conclusion

In his speech at Howard, Obama made one of the bold moves that have shifted his image from that of a man who, as Obama said at the Apostolic Church of God, "wasn't black enough," to that of an African American who can authentically lead the black community as its representative. By using King's rhetorical strategies of repetition, elevation, heroic and sacred association, and the Moses/Joshua typology, Obama establishes the ethos he needs to win the black vote: he shows that he is a man who understands both the African American experience and how to lead blacks as a successor to King. By using language reminiscent of King, Obama establishes himself as a leader who will continue the struggle for civil rights and who will lead America to the Promised Land of justice and equality.

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Questions for Discussion and Journaling

1. A reader analyzing a text can only match moves the text is making to existing categories (for example, as Post finds instances in Obama's speech of "elevation" or "typology") if they already know that those categories exist. What did Post need to already know to do this analysis, and what are some ways she might have learned that knowledge?
2. Use *Silva Rhetoricae* (rhetoric.byu.edu) to look up other kinds of stylistic repetition besides *anaphora*. How many kinds does the site list, and which ones do you see used in everyday language?
3. Do you buy, ultimately, Post's argument that Obama was deliberately trying to echo the style, sound, and role of Martin Luther King Jr.? Explain your answer, and, if you think he was, offer an opinion on how successful you think that association was.

Applying and Exploring Ideas

1. Find a copy of Obama's 2007 Howard University speech online. For each of Post's categories, see if you can locate additional examples in the speech to those she already points out. Then, examine the speech for other style moves Obama makes. (Use *Silva Rhetoricae* to identify terms and moves you might want to look for specifically.) Write a short paper that extends Post's analysis of the speech with the additional examples and additional style moves you've found.
2. Write an analysis of the rhetorical situation of Obama's Howard speech using Grant-Davie's definition of *rhetorical situation* (see page 350), emphasizing *kairos*, *exigence*, and context.

Meta Moment

How does Post's article change your understanding of rhetoric? What do you understand better about rhetoric after reading it?